

Isaiah 2

The Future House of God

² The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Judgment Pronounced on Arrogance

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Matthew 24 - The Necessity for Watchfulness

³⁶“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Visions and Realities

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Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

Kerra Becker English

We live in a reality that is limited by time and space, just like all the other mortal creatures. We can't speed up or slow down time, and though we can travel significantly faster than our horse and buggy ancestors dared to dream, we cannot break the laws of physics to get from one place to another. And yet, we have been given a god-like gift when it comes to dealing creatively with the time and space allotted to us: We can imagine our future. We can envision what we would like for our reality to be. And then, we can even work diligently toward that reality.

Jesus and the prophets were both visionaries in this way. They were willing to cast visions of a future that would take place "in the days to come" or speculate "about that day and hour that no one knows." They spoke not only of what was happening right now, but what could be possible, what might be probable. They had no call center to poll voting or marketing trends. They didn't even have world-wide news sources reporting every 15 minutes about breaking news to see what was happening right now. Rather, they gave wings to their words through those who had the willingness to listen and then carry such a vision into an unknown future.

For us, today, perhaps the excessive amount of noise about what is happening all over the nation and around the world, and the prognosticators that are more interested in what makes ratings than what makes reality give us reason to wonder if we would notice if someone had a true vision to announce to our broken and hurting world. Are we tired of watching the "breaking" news when it all seems to sound drearily the same? Are we weary of hearing all the

opinions about how we ought to interpret the news as it breaks? I know I am, and yet, I also know that the numbness I'm feeling around the edges isn't helpful either. Staying "informed" in what used to be the traditional ways – things like watching the news, and reading the papers – isn't quite the same when it's happening on the internet and being marketed directly to me. I know that the sheer amount of noise is designed to keep me clicking but complacent, nodding my head along with people who think like I do rather than inspiring me to get involved with something, anything happening in my local community. Then the ads only amplify the same effect. News getting you down? The side bar reminds me to go Black Friday shopping. Get that little dopamine rush from a good bargain and let the big picture go.

The problem is that there is a reality out there that merits my attention. Six beautiful and beloved children died in a school bus crash in Chattanooga right before the Thanksgiving holiday. The peaceful pipeline protests in North Dakota have turned deadly dangerous as water hoses have been turned on the Native Americans who are trying to protect their land and their drinking water. And those are just a couple headlines that would be breaking my heart into a million little pieces if there weren't such a multitude of headlines like this coming into the realm of my news feed every week. These aren't even people that I know – but they are people that I care about. What am I supposed to do when I learn about such tragedies? How am I to understand what's going on right now, let alone look up and ahead enough to see where I can make a difference?

For that I look to a concept explained by my theological mentor, Doug Ottati. He coined the phrase "Hopeful Realism" to describe just that very intersection between our real world and the hope we have for what the world could be, and he describes it like this:

This is an outlook that acknowledges our significant but limited and dependent powers and capabilities; that expects diminishment, conflict, fragmentation, and death; but that does not fail to look for enlargement, reconciliation, and life. Hopeful realism recognizes the persistently destructive bents as well as the promising possibilities of all persons, communities, and institutions. It therefore subjects all of them to criticism even as it affirms them all. It summons all to repentance as well as to an ethic of faithful participation that respects and enhances the good and abundant life of true communion with God in community with others.

Doug's phrasing is always precise and profoundly theological. But in remembering this truth, I'm finding exactly where I want to be for such a time such as this - hopefully engaged with the real world. Not despondent, not immobilized, but fully aware that people have persistently destructive bents as well as promising possibilities. Remembering that institutions – whether they belong to church or state – require our due diligence to hold them to an ethic, as Doug says, of faithful participation that respects and enhances the good and abundant life of true communion with God in community with others.

We can do that. We can imagine that world, that future, because we are well versed in the future thinking of the prophets that believed there could come a time when swords would be beat into plowshares. We can look at the world today and see how dramatically things can change from one second to the next – about the day and hour no one knows. The coming of the cosmic Christ – the infusion of the living Christ into the world – is indeed something to pray for. And if it is to surprise us like a thief in the night – let us be ready for it.

Now the Jesus passage for this week is the utterly confusing one. It is a well-known “rapture” text according to the gospel of the “Left Behind” series. But I'm not sure that's how I'm looking to interpret it. And yet, it is, at the start of Advent, a reminder that for us to have

hope in the real world, we must be looking ahead, planning, preparing, waiting, and then doing absolutely the same things we are already doing, every day. We still work the fields. We still mill the grain. We still go to work. We still take care of our kids or watch the grandkids. And yet, our outlook is hopeful, expectant, that the Son of Man will know the timing of our future even better than we ourselves might.

This ability for us to imagine a future where the wolf lies down with the lamb, to be cautiously optimistic about what lies ahead is indeed a gift. But Christian optimism is not a hide under a rock, shiny, happy, feel-good positivism. The wolf is still a wolf, after all. And often time we feel more like the lamb chops. But the story of God's people is persistently a story about hope, real hope that exists precisely at the crossroads of despair. Remember that it was hope for a different kind of future that was born in a cattle stall. It was hope that hung in the balance with Jesus on the cross. And it was hope beyond all hopes that rolled back a rock to expose an empty grave. Our story is one of hope that clings to life and pronounces it good, truly good, abundant even, in the darkest hours of a morning that hasn't come yet.

Live into that kind of hope, that kind of future, and then when the news doesn't make sense, and our hearts are breaking, God will lift us up with the ever dawning of a new day. Amen.